

Prophecy in the New Testament

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Among his instructions on preaching in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes: “A preacher has to contemplate the word, but . . . also has to contemplate [the] people” (§154). The people are the preacher’s purpose, and the content of preaching emerges from their needs—their anxieties and questions, their situations. Without an understanding of the people, the message of the preacher is worthless, uninspired.

The same could be said for prophets. A prophet speaks on God’s behalf, but the prophet’s message is not for God’s sake; it is for the sake of the people. The prophet reads the signs of the times, which are really nothing other than the hearts of the people, how they are responding internally and externally to the world around them. The prophet’s message is therefore grounded in the people’s past experiences, current situations, and promised futures. At the root of them all—continually pushing toward the surface and into the future—is the possibility of transformation. Even when the prophet’s words sound like doom, the message is a sign of faith—not only in God but in the human capacity to respond to the divine message.

Where in the New Testament do we find prophecy, this phenomenon of searching hearts while simultaneously listening for the voice of God? Not surprisingly, in the first century CE prophetic activity was not a uniform practice or experience. There were many notions of prophecy and many ways of practicing it—spoken words, dreams and visions, healings and exorcisms, predictions of the future. But in all cases prophecy is the work of one who is called by God or, as in 1 Corinthians, one who is given the spiritual gift.

We will briefly consider several ways prophecy is presented in the New Testament, from the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus, to the Spirit-infused community of Corinth as described by Paul, to the prophetic



The Baptism of Christ, workshop of Veit Stoss.
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

message of the book of Revelation. We will then consider what this prophetic witness and the enduring hope it proclaims can mean for our church today.

John the Baptist: A Prophet and More than a Prophet

When we think of prophecy in the New Testament it may be the image of John the Baptist that first comes to mind. His physical description echoes that of Elijah: “clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist” (Mark 1:6; cp. 2 Kgs 1:8). Jesus himself identified John as Elijah who has “already come” (Matt 17:12), the expected precursor of the Messiah.

The content of John’s prophetic ministry was twofold. First, he was the forerunner and announcer of the Messiah, a vocation that, according to Luke’s Gospel, began *in utero*, when John identified the presence of Jesus in

the womb of Mary (Luke 1:41-44). His ministry then continued into adulthood with his identification of Jesus as the Messiah and Lamb of God (Mark 1:9-11; John 3:25-30). In the words of the prologue of John's Gospel, the Baptist came to "testify to the light, so that all might believe through him" (John 1:7). The baptism of Jesus by John provided the opportunity for Jesus to be further identified, by the voice from heaven, as the Father's "beloved Son" (Matt 3:17) and served to initiate his public ministry.

John was also the conscience of the people. His baptismal ministry inspired repentance (Mark 1:4); his preaching ministry insisted upon moral conversion, exhorting generosity to the poor and renunciation of cheating and oppression (Luke 3:10-14). Large crowds, including tax collectors and soldiers, went out to John, evidence that he understood the people and preached a compelling message (Mark 1:5; Luke 3:10-14). Public esteem for John as a prophet was tremendous (Matt 21:26).

Jesus described John as "more than a prophet" (Matt 11:9), "a burning and shining lamp" (John 5:35), and even the greatest human being to have ever lived (Matt 11:11). Jesus' praise reflects the unique nature of John's prophetic activity as a preparation for Jesus' own ministry and message.

Was Jesus a Prophet?

The question whether Jesus was a prophet is best answered by those who experienced his ministry. There were many who spontaneously identified him as such, including the Samaritan woman (John 4:19), the man born blind (John 9:17), the crowds fed by the loaves and fish (John 6:14), the crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem before his death (Matt 21:11), the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:19), and miscellaneous others (Mark 6:15; 8:28; John 7:40). Herod heard that people were calling Jesus "a prophet" or "Elijah"; he thought Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mark 6:14-16). Comparisons with Elijah and Moses appear in the Gospels (e.g., Mark 8:28; John 6:14).



Medallion with Saint John the Baptist from an Icon Frame. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (public domain).

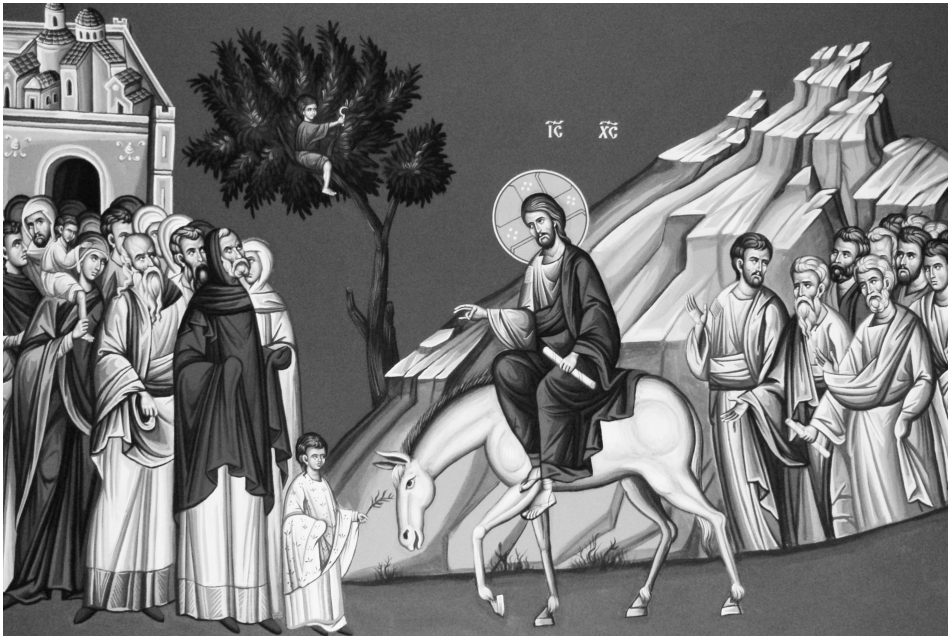


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Although Jesus never directly referred to himself as a prophet, he aligned himself with the prophetic tradition in several ways. When rejected at Nazareth, Jesus responded with the proverb that a prophet is not without honor except in the place he hails from (Matt 13:57). Determined to journey to Jerusalem despite the danger he sensed was ahead, he remarked that “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem” (Luke 13:33, NRSV).

Officially “commissioned” at his baptism, where the descent of the Spirit and the words of God echoed words spoken of the prophet Isaiah (Mark 1:10-11; Isa 42:1), Jesus spoke and acted as one having divine authority: “The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). Jesus often speaks, in John’s Gospel, of being God’s emissary or spokesperson: “My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me” (John 7:16). His mighty deeds (healings and exorcisms) are prophetic signs of the coming reign of God (Mark 1:27), along with other intentional actions such as the cleansing of the temple (Mark 11:15) and his determined journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51).

Of course, like John the Baptist, Jesus was a prophet, yet he was more than a prophet. His divine authority extended beyond that of an emissary or spokesperson. He not only delivered the message; he was the message (John 1:14-18). Appropriately, the raising of the widow’s son at Nain led to

these two spontaneous responses among the people: “A great prophet has arisen in our midst” and “God has visited his people” (Luke 7:16).

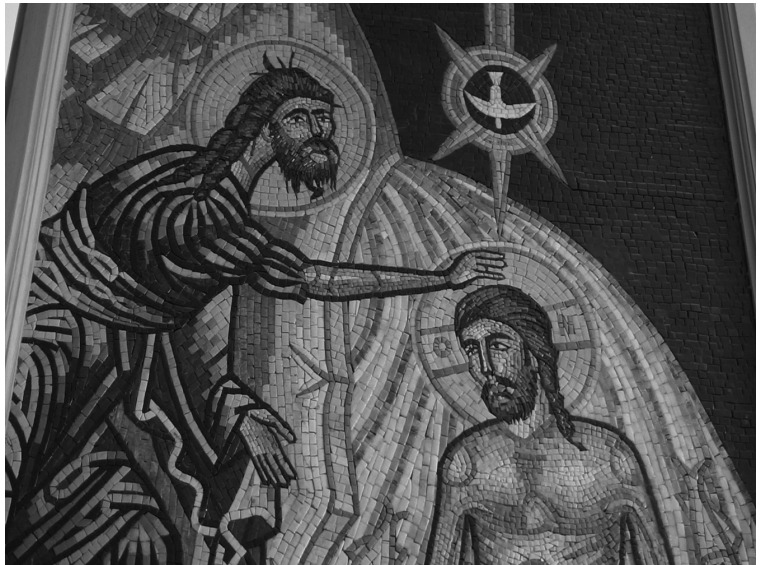
Also like John the Baptist, Jesus was clearly esteemed by the people, whose nature he understood (John 2:25) and whose hearts and intentions he knew (Luke 5:22). Jesus’ prophetic message was an urgent one demanding change of mind, heart, and direction, and challenging disciples to single-hearted love of God and neighbor. This message of repentance was not delivered without expectation of change; it was clearly one that Jesus expected and hoped would take hold in the lives of those who heard his words.

Like Elijah and Jeremiah before him, Jesus was rejected and, like John the Baptist, he was put to death. Surely his death and resurrection are prophetic signs as well.

Prophecy as a Spiritual Gift in First Corinthians

Paul understands the Holy Spirit as present and active among all who believe (1 Cor 12:7; Gal 4:6), but prophecy is a particular manifestation of the Spirit, a unique “gift” or “grace” (*charism*). We have Paul’s lengthiest treatment of the “spiritual gifts” in 1 Corinthians 12–14, where he addresses a fractured Corinthian community in which individuals were apparently competitively striving for various spiritual gifts. Here Paul’s focus is clear: each gift is given not for the sake of the recipient but for the sake of the community. Prophecy is therefore misconstrued if it is practiced in a spirit of self-importance. Like all the gifts, it is meant for the building up of the church (1 Cor 14:26).

Mosaic of John Baptizing Jesus, Saint George Church in Madaba, Jordan.
Photo by oratai jitsatsue via Getty Images.



Paul's contrast between the value of the gift of prophecy and that of speaking in tongues is a primer in prophecy's core interest: the prophet's fellow human beings: "For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to human beings but to God, for no one listens; he utters mysteries in spirit. On the other hand, one who prophesies does speak to human beings, for their building up, encouragement, and solace. Whoever speaks in a tongue builds himself up, but whoever prophesies builds up the church" (1 Cor 14:2-4). As he often does, Paul points to his own ministry as an example: "I give thanks to God that I speak in tongues more than any of you, but in the church I would rather speak five words with my mind, so as to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor 14:18-19).

Paul emphasizes the self-control required of a prophet, another indication of the prophet's concern primarily for the recipients of the message. Prophets should be prepared to speak one at a time, to be open to the discernment of other prophets, even to keep silent when silence is called for, "so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (1 Cor 14:31). This kind of orderly practice of a spiritual gift reflects God's own order: "Indeed, the spirits of prophets are under the prophets' control, since he is not the God of disorder but of peace" (1 Cor 14:32-33).

While prophecy is primarily intended for the community of believers, Paul is also confident in the prophets' ability to reach those who "come in" to the community as unbelievers. Prophecy that is focused on the people rather than the self has the potential to be missionary in nature; the "unbeliever or uninstructed person" who hears the community's prophets



The Angel giving John the letter for one of the Churches of Asia (Revelation 2 and 3), Real Biblioteca de San Lorenzo. Photo by Claveyrolas Michel via Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

“will be convinced . . . and the secrets of [the] heart will be disclosed, and so [that person] will fall down and worship God, declaring, ‘God is really in your midst’” (1 Cor 14:24-25).

The Book of Revelation as a Prophetic Message

The book of Revelation, said to be composed by John of Patmos, self-identifies as prophecy (1:3; 22:18). Its opening verses echo those of other prophetic books such as Jeremiah and Amos, and the prophetic visions within the book reflect the visions and experiences of other prophets including Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. John writes his prophecy on the authority of God, the risen Christ, and the Spirit (1:9-10).

Although John’s prophecy is eschatological in nature—looking to the end of human history and God’s final triumph over evil—like all prophecy it is primarily focused on the present moment. The late-first-century political situation of Roman rule was oppressive. John considered it evil, and a threat not only to the lives of believers but to their salvation. This belief is communicated in his prophetic visions and urgent tone: John is convinced that many believers have become complacent toward Roman rule and ways, which he finds diametrically opposed to the ways of Christ and God.

Still, it is clear that, although the situation is dire, John expects that Christians in their current situation can change, can recoup “the love [they] had at first” (Rev 2:4), open the door to a Christ who knocks on it, and even sit on the throne with both Father and Son (Rev 3:20-21).

Though they do not receive as much attention as John’s colorful visions, the letters to the churches found in Revelation 2–3 are examples of a prophetic message that focuses on the people, their situations, and their futures. Each of these seven “mini-letters” is written on behalf of the risen Christ and in his voice, and each one concludes with a prophetic exhortation to listen to “what the Spirit says to the churches.” Each letter speaks to the successes and failures of specific communities: the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. (We might benefit now by reading them—though critically—as messages to our own local communities, dioceses, or the universal church.) Corresponding promises and warnings serve as both expressions of divine love and purposeful incentives to change direction.

Like the prophets before him, John of Patmos, called to be a prophet to “peoples, nations, tongues” (Rev 10:11), is a person of hope. No matter

The letter to Thyatira, the home of Lydia (Acts 16) is not a model for imitation.

how much complacency or failure he witnesses among believers, his prophetic efforts are themselves a sign that he is willing them to move from complacency to authentic faith, and that he believes they can.

Prophecy: Hopeful and Ongoing

The stereotype of a prophet as a pessimist is unfortunate. Prophets may be among the most optimistic of human beings. Why prophesy if the words will not prompt conversion? Why act if the actions do not bring change? Why speak if every word falls on hopelessly dry soil? Every prophet has his or her failures—John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, and John of Patmos had theirs. And yet the hearts of many were changed.

The Acts of the Apostles describes the memorable scene of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the church in its earliest days. Recalling the words of the prophet Joel, Peter then declared a new age of prophecy among this fledgling crew of believers:

“It will come to pass in the last days,” God says,
“that I will pour out a portion of my spirit
upon all flesh.

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your young men shall see visions,
your old men shall dream dreams.

Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids
I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days,
and they shall prophesy.” (Acts 2:17-18; cp. Joel 3:1-2)

We still live in this age of prophecy, among those who dream dreams and speak on God’s behalf. The authentic prophets among us are focused on *us*—not on themselves, not on an artificially-conceived end goal, not on a hazy future that never comes. Like Jesus, they understand human nature; they help us identify what is missing. This does not mean their message is comfortable. Often it is not. But it is spoken for the sake of building up, with full expectation of transformation, in hope for the hearts of the people.

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